

Workshop Prepares Communicators to Work With Media During Crises

Message mapping session takes all-hazards approach to crisis communications

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A February message-mapping workshop brought together subject matter experts and communicators from several KDHE bureaus and outside related agencies to look at an all-hazards approach to public information flow and media relations during a crisis. The Kansas Bioterrorism Program sponsored the workshop conducted by Vincent T. Covello, Ph.D., and Stacia Tipton from the Center For Risk Communication.



Covello, a nationally and internationally recognized trainer, researcher, consultant and expert on Risk Communications, worked with New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and his staff prior to and during the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center after terrorist attacks on 9-11. He has also assisted officials around the world on public health crises such as West Nile Virus, Mad Cow Disease and SARS.

Participants in the workshop included the Kansas Bioterrorism Program, the Bureau of Air and Radiation, KDHE laboratory, KDHE legal staff and the Public Information Office. Other state agencies represented were the Kansas Adjutant General's Office/Division of Emergency Management, Kansas State Fire Marshal's Office, Kansas National Guard, the Animal Health Department and the Department of Agriculture. Representatives from the Kansas Association of Local and Rural Health Departments, the Kansas Livestock Association, the Shawnee County Health Agency, the Topeka Fire Department also took part in the workshop.

Message mapping involves establishing no more than three key messages in response to predicted questions from the media during a crisis. The media usually asks three types of questions: overarching questions, seeking an overall assessment of a crisis; informational questions, to get a more detailed picture of the crisis; and challenging questions that can sometimes be confrontational in nature. Message maps list the three key points along with three supporting points for each key point for all anticipated questions. Participants were provided with a list of the "77 Questions Commonly Asked By Journalists During a Crisis," and sample message maps.

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Message maps were developed during the workshop for several crisis scenarios, including incidents of agri-terrorism, bioterrorism, and the release of radiation from a “dirty bomb.” Participants then practiced the role of spokesperson and conveyed the key message to Covello who took the role of a journalist to demonstrate how preparation with key messages eases the burden of dealing with the media during a crisis and improves the information flow to the public through the media.

Covello will be returning to Kansas in April, when he will lead two all-day seminars on Risk Communications in Dodge City on the 27th and Salina on the 28th. For more information on these seminars, contact Mike Cameron (mcamero1@kdhe.state.ks.us) or Mike Heideman, (mheidema@kdhe.state.ks.us). More information on Vincent T. Covello, Ph.D., and the Center for Risk Communication is available on the Web at www.centerforriskcommunication.org.